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Taming the Paper Tiger of Tehran…18 months later

Thesis versus outcome: A comment on events from 2008-2010

The essay 'Taming the Paper Tiger of Tehran' was written in July 2008. It identified the weaknesses from which Iran suffers in its confrontation with its adversaries, and espoused a specific strategy by which the West, Sunni Arabs and Israel could successfully leverage those weaknesses to derail Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The thesis was based on the essential premise that the Iranian regime is weak at home and over-estimated abroad, and that it is exceptionally vulnerable to a diplomatic demarche that would, in essence, "call its bluff". Nothing that has happened in the intervening year and a half has changed this outlook. To the contrary: all material events during this period have reinforced both the philosophical and empirical underpinnings of the proposed strategy.

As predicted, Iran's political system has proven to be a chimera; what was referred to in the Summer of 2008 as the "thin ice on which the regime treads" has been shown to be, to coin a phrase, "paper tiger thin" since the 2009 election. This not only confirms the underlying assumptions upon which the essay relied, but points to a unique opportunity to speak confidently to Iran while it is evidencing weaknesses its leaders were unwilling to acknowledge, or even perhaps believe existed, in 2008. The regime now knows how vulnerable it is...and is scared of further instability that could topple their form of governance.

Nonetheless, the Iranians have played a complex chess board exceptionally well. As predicted, Iran has employed “feints of compromise followed by recalcitrance” and has thus managed to forestall those who oppose its nuclear agenda. With exceptional dexterity, Iran has now reached the tipping point beyond which its ambition to weaponize its nuclear technology will be ratified beyond any doubt. Through the twin media of obfuscation and distraction, the regime has not only transcended the pressures under which it labors, but has even had the courage to rebuff President Obama's "open hand" despite suffering from the disadvantages of both a divided internal polity and a weak economy.

While Tehran's domestic power base has deteriorated, its adversaries have remained reluctant to seize upon their advantage. Emboldened therefore by the timidity of even their fiercest detractors, and working on the premise that the best defence is a great offence, the regime has been seduced by the gambler's ethos of pressing its run of luck. Thrusting with Lenin's proverbial bayonet and finding nothing but mush, Iran has maintained the initiative against its regional adversaries:

America and NATO disadvantaged

Recognizing that America holds the key to countering its nuclear ambitions, Iran continues to stir the pot in Iraq and Afghanistan to neutralize war weary Americans and Europeans who might otherwise be willing to entertain a more muscular approach towards Tehran's recalcitrance on the nuclear issue. As if to highlight their presence within the darkest recesses of Western fears for the stability of another sector of Asia, in the firmest example to date of the presence of an "axis of evil" the Iranians themselves have created what appears to be an alliance with North Korea, both to train nuclear scientists as well as to assist Syria in advancing along the nuclear value chain. As a sideline, though not likely to be much more than an irritating sideshow until such time as its Hezbollah cells are activated, Iran is engaging in a new diplomacy, suborned by Venezuela and its cronies, which seeks to keep the United States in a defensive posture in its own backyard in the Americas.

The Gulf Arabs feel the heat

The Gulf States have already begun to feel the first blush of Iran's capacity to subvert them. Expanding their ability to foment unrest beyond Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, Tehran has been exploiting Shia co-religionist issues to create a greater sense of insecurity among the Gulf Arabs. By ratcheting up its rhetorical pressure on Bahrain, Iran has been subtly exerting its leverage on the Gulf monarchies in a manner reminiscent of Saddam Hussein's early verbal shots across the bow with Kuwait. Oman and Qatar have already moved to hedge their bets. This in turn highlights the demographics of a Dubai that is economically displaced and thus represents a potentially seditious consideration for the bolder elements in the UAE who would challenge Iran. Most importantly, Iran is opportunistically abetting conflict in Yemen which is meant to erode, psychologically and materially, Sunni Arab fortitude on their eastern front by necessitating a shifting of attention to GCC-leader Saudi Arabia's southern flank. This policy serves three purposes: training the focus of Saudi forces on a counter-insurgency against the twin threats of Al Qaeda and the Houthis in Yemen; opening the prospect of a two-front confrontation with Shiism meant to silence decisively the once strong but now muted Saudi advocacy of a pre-emptive American or Israeli strike on Iran; and raising the nightmarish prospect of an irredentist Shia revival in the oil-rich Eastern Provinces that would coincide with the ongoing internal crackdown on Al Qaeda.

Israel, Egypt and the Levant

Iran has kept Israel on its toes by re-arming Hezbollah directly and through its rehabilitated ally Syria. The once well-trodden diplomatic path to Damascus, shunned since the Hariri assassination and Syria's ignominious military withdrawal from Lebanon, has been reopened and Syria's "centrality to Mid-East peace" reaffirmed by much of the world community. In the original essay, one was able to write that "reports of Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in Gaza indicate a new level of engagement." Since then, Iran's Levantine proxies have not only rearmed Hamas but, despite ever more audacious Israeli counter-measures, have reportedly managed to smuggle longer range missiles into Gaza that create the real prospect of Tel Aviv being targeted from two directions.

These moves come at a time when Israel's strategic posture remains little improved from where we left off: (Israel) *"sees itself trying to decide between making a very flimsy peace with its remaining Arab enemies or circling the wagons in the inchoate hope that something better may come along. It will not. If there is to be any hope of peace with the Arabs, Israel and its supporters will need to confront Iran. The alternative is a debilitating war of attrition that Israel cannot win. Between demographic advantages, the revitalization of their finances and, concomitantly, the resources that can be applied to purchasing the world's most advanced weapons systems, Israel's regional rivals are steadily eroding the strategic edge on which Israel must depend for its survival."*

The public distancing that has taken place between Jerusalem and Ankara since Operation Cast Lead has not improved this dynamic. The warming of relations between Turkey and Syria on the one hand, and with Iran on the other hand, is the most obvious signal to date that Turkey is plotting a new course with its foreign policy. The fact that its alliance with Israel is the most public casualty of this decision 'to look East' is no accident and is, additionally, a clear confirmation that the nations of Eastern Europe (as well as the former Soviet Union) no longer assume that the path to Washington goes through Jerusalem and its friends.

The implications of a nuclear Iran on the Middle East and the Peace Process

As postulated in the original essay, Tehran is the prime leader of the rejectionists that sponsor and sustain Hamas and indeed *"the greatest obstacle to peace between Israel and the Arabs is the spoiler role played by Iran"*. Even today, by sustaining the spiritual and intellectual rejection of a Middle East which can accommodate Israel's existence, Hamas (and Iran's overt proxy, Hezbollah) provide the muscle and intimidation that inhibits a genuine peace process that has any chance of resulting in a deal between the Palestinians and Israel. Unsurprisingly, under Ehud Olmert's premiership the outlines of a Grand Bargain were reached with the Palestinians. They were broadly similar to those outlined by Ehud Barak years earlier. This deal, which would have formally ended the Arab-Israeli conflict with the Sunni world, remained unconsummated as the Fatah leadership weighed the prospect of a Hamas backlash. Without Iran's support, the rejectionist camp would be neutralized. Nothing has changed, therefore, to warrant a new assessment regarding the centrality of Iran to the lack of a Mid-East peace agreement.

On the other hand, it is arguable that Iran has taken advantage of this paralysis in the peace process to advance along a new front. By building on the latent virus of indigenous Islamist extremism represented by Hamas' Gaza gambit, and establishing cells within Egypt, Tehran's proxies are not only projecting the regime's capabilities into a new sphere, but threatening to create an unholy, if only de facto, anti-Israel alliance of convenience encompassing the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement and a Hezbollah terrorist network connected to Gaza. Incongruous and unsustainable as such a combination may appear, its ability to instigate genuine instability should not be ignored. Post-liberation Iraq, Lebanon (at almost any given moment) and the present turbulence in Yemen are cases in point that Arab politics make strange bedfellows. While the Yemeni security forces should not be compared simplistically to those of Egypt's, this false sense of security cuts both ways. In terms of importance, Yemen is a sideshow by comparison with Egypt.

Successful destabilization of Egypt would undermine the most important Israeli diplomatic success since its founding...and throw into chaos the key pillar of Israel's defence posture. The effect on the Gulf Arabs of a more aggressive Egyptian foreign policy, recalling the miseries of the more activist Nasser-era, would be equally traumatic. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that any withdrawal by Egypt from its long-term accommodation with Israel would create complexities that would surpass Iran as the gravest strategic threat faced by Israel. Any complacency on the part of Israeli planners that Islamist militancy emanating from Gaza is more an "Egyptian problem" than an Israeli one misses the key point: that Israel's favorable strategic status quo is derived from the peaceful western border on which all military planning and budgets (and hence the national economy) depend.

While laziness with regard to Egypt would be a disaster, a corollary to this is the prevailing complacency with regard to Jordan. The Hashemites represent a demographically challenged Sunni monarchy sandwiched unenviably between what will inevitably develop, if left unchecked, into an irredentist Palestinian movement led by Hamas (supported by Hezbollah and its Syrian handlers), and an Iraq now dominated for the first time by Shia republicans. A Hezbollah-abetted attempt by Hamas to undermine Jordan, presently deemed unthinkable, should be expected. Even if the King

can survive and retain power, an intimidated and defensive Jordan would have considerable implications for Israel and its Sunni allies to the south.

Finally, it is hard to argue that a nuclear Iran will make the region more stable. Indeed, the failure of the proliferation regime has predictably set off a nascent nuclear arms race in the Middle East. For understandable reasons, the growing belief that Tehran will soon acquire nuclear capability and change the rules of the game has necessitated the Sunni Arabs playing catch up with Tehran or risk future blackmail in all the areas where a shift in the power balance matters most. There seems little prospect of diminishing the Arabs panic if there is no action taken against Iran. Convinced that America has "blinked" in the face of Persian gamesmanship, their nuclearization presents the next generation of Israeli, American and even Arab planners with a host of nightmarish scenarios.

The only solution now: calling Iran's bluff

Iran is pursuing an impressive array of initiatives. But it's a very overstretched agenda for a second-rate power with a weak economy, mediocre military capabilities, and a discredited political system. Like a bubble that is near bursting, the slightest dislocation could cause not just the regime, but Iran itself, to implode into a welter of competing and hostile sub-cultures.

As has always been my contention, the Persians are not to be underestimated. Experts at the long game, they know how to play a weak hand brilliantly. But they are very, very susceptible to the ultimatum that must be made to them. Fortunately, the confluence of factors that renders Iran vulnerable have now merged to the point where the Iranian government may consider more carefully than ever before "an offer that they cannot refuse". Such an offer might resemble that which Europe extended via Javier Solana a year or so … an impressive "package" of aid, technology transfers, industrial development and the like. In any event, whatever inducement is offered should represent the twin attributes of providing the regime with the opportunity to declare victory for its steadfastness while resulting in an outcome that defangs the nuclear program in a genuinely effective way. The face saving aspect must be on the Iranian side; the reality of having killed Iran's ability to build nuclear weapons must be on the anti-Tehran coalition's side.

There has never been a better time for such a deal to work. Rarely has an erstwhile "infallible" theocracy been more seriously undermined by its own inherent contradictions than has Iran's this past year. With its deeply rooted corruption and cynicism exposed for all to see, and the legitimacy of the regime now at the lowest point since 1979, Iran's leadership is most keenly aware of the fact that the home front on which it has relied for support is now precarious.

As the December deadline has passed, now is the time for America (with pressure from Israel and its de facto Arab allies) to meet with the Iranians, quietly (in Geneva, perhaps) and call the "Paper Tiger's" bluff. Utilizing a sober assessment of what the Chinese refer to as "the correlation of forces", they can turn the tide. To return to the crux of the original essay:

"… the vulnerability of Iran's leaders should be leveraged with a quiet ultimatum. The gist of this demarche would be as follows: we understand that you have played a great game until now. But it is time to take the offer (an offer that would) provide for a face-saving means for Tehran to declare its own victory. The consequences of not accepting (a) package of incentives would be an explicit threat to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, or suborn Israel's attempts to do so. Whereas Tehran would be advised that their not expanding the war would allow them to continue to pump oil, the regime would be told that any attempt to broaden the war to hit at Americans in Iraq, or its Arab or Israeli allies, or to attempt to hold hostage the free transit of oil through the Straits of Hormuz, would be met with counterblows against Iranian economic targets that would shut down Iran's oil exports as well. To those observers who have been weaned on Iranian propaganda that they control the world's destiny by controlling the region's oil, this might seem a hollow threat. It is not.

For what action is it that could cause Iran to be brought to its knees? The answer is brutally simple: cut off the oil revenues. If the central government were to lose its one source of income, the regime would be subjected to severe stress and, very possibly, collapse. Without revenue there could be no subsidies and patronage and the economic foundation of Persian power – already tenuous even with windfall profits—would evaporate. This would not be unprecedented in Iran's modern history. Even the Shah recognized that any hopes of riding out the revolution were mere wishful thinking once the oil workers put down their tools.

The point should be made that, whereas the entire Gulf region depends on oil revenues for their livelihoods, only Iran depends on them for their survival. Very simply, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States do not share Iran's vulnerability in equal measure. Should Iran retaliate to an attack with a retaliatory strike on their oil facilities, the Arabs would be hurt…but not fatally crippled. The ability to draw on well over a trillion dollars of reserves would more than see them through the crisis. This is a luxury that Iran, with its much larger population, does not enjoy. Even Ahmedinejad's kindred spirit in Venezuela would not be able to rescue an economy that has little other than some pistachio nuts and carpets to compensate. The Iranians are not stupid and would have to think twice about throwing the dice with their very survival by lashing out at their neighbors' oil infrastructure."

This bottom line remains this:

"Despite its bluster, the regime is vulnerable politically, economically and militarily. It is in far greater risk of being undermined and indeed overthrown than any of its enemies…"

This remains the ultimate end game for both the original essay and this updated assessment.

Myths debunked: The return of the military option

Once accepted as a truism, the assumption that an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities will rally the Opposition to the regime is no longer to be accepted blindly as fact. Daily media assaults on the Western powers trying to 'hold Iran back from its legitimate nuclear rights' are obviously doing little if anything to galvanize support for the mullahs. If it has, it must already be discounted. Moreover, it is unlikely that the same mullahs who have so woefully failed to deliver the goods to their people will be saved by an air campaign against nuclear installations and Revolutionary Guard targets. Though unproven, the argument that decried a pre-emptive attack on Iran as being a counter-productive strategy is as now more likely to be a myth than a fact. More than that, the failure of foreign policy represented by an attack on Iran itself just might be an 'upside case' serving to highlight to the Iranian people just how incompetent this regime has proven to be in every other sphere by which governments are judged (inflation, unemployment, and other aspects relating to economic well-being).

With an economy that has not yet recovered to pre-1979 living standards, it is an interesting question as to how a roll-back of Iran's foreign policy objectives (of which the nuclear issue is a major, but by no means exclusive, part) would resonate with Iran's inchoate electorate. While there is a core population that will support the regime come what may so long as the subsidies and patronage it enjoys still flows to them, that number will surely dwindle if government financial support no longer exists. ***As was stated very clearly in the original essay, should for any reason the oil revenues on which the patronage system of the Persian Empire depends be disrupted, through industrial or military action, the regime will fall.***

Weighing the prospect of military action has been given a second wind by events on the streets of Tehran. This aspect cannot be stressed enough: The newly fluid domestic dynamic represents a perfect trigger for calling Iran's bluff. Whereas the contention of the original piece was that the

vaunted Iranian lion was indeed a "Paper Tiger", this view was held by most observers to be speculative at best. Indeed, it was the acceptance of the premise that the Iranian regime was fundamentally legitimate and enjoyed popular sovereignty that lay at the core of the reinvigorated "engagement" policy, with its presumed goal a detente of sorts with the Iranian regime. *The debunking of the myth of the theocracy's popular sovereignty which was, in the original "Paper Tiger" essay, a proposition second only in importance to exposing Iran's vulnerability to an economically derived regime change, has opened new possibilities that heretofore have not existed to implement the strategy of calling Iran's bluff...or bringing the regime down if necessary.*

Even the Revolutionary Guards may just feel that taking on a potential assault of their military (and, even worse, economic) installations at a time of domestic discord and regional tensions is a bridge too far for them. In any event, it's not a convincing premise to think that Khamenei would wish to take the risk of the Islamic Republic's collapse and that the army would resist his decree for a 'standing down' from the nuclear confrontation. None of this assumes a concerted effort to stir up the latent restiveness of the minorities, which remains latent:

"Superimpose onto the inherent vulnerabilities of an oppressive government the fact that Iran is one of the world's last remaining imperial states and the regime's susceptibility to reason may become more acute. Iran is governed by the dominant Persian population, which comprises less than half the population. The remaining minorities (Kurds, Azeris, Ahwaz, Baluchis) are a source of concern for the regime, and have the capability to be highly restive if they perceive central authority to be weakened."

If even a relatively modest effort were made to engage with the separatists/autonomists of these regions, the cumulative pressure on Tehran would likely be unbearable.

In summary, the unattractive nature of the Iranian regime makes them devoid of many real friends at home or abroad, and thus susceptible to military suasion. As such, the remaining interested powers may still be mobilized to support an ultimatum. On the other hand, failure to deliver "an offer that they can't refuse" soon will mean effectively acquiescing to a nuclear Iran, with all its attendant consequences. Simply put, the "world community" has Iran-fatigue and wants closure, one way or the other… and to move on. And the Iranians know it. So this is it; it's either soon, or never.

The Beginning and End of Engagement

When he launched his "outstretched hand" to Iran's rulers, President Obama's assumptions were based on certain predicates that are no longer applicable. It was assumed that, charmless and obnoxious as Iran's regime might be, it was as legitimate as any other semi-democracy and that its leaders enjoyed a respectable measure of popular support. This is no held to be longer true.

Those that yearn for a genuine democracy, the "Neda Generation", need no inducement. They are already looking for a more robust engagement with the West. And so, rather than enjoying the mantle of statesmanship in reaching out to an old foe, the Unites States finds itself treating with an enemy that is, if not completely naked, then scantily clad in terms of legitimacy. No longer is this true just among an international community that recoils at the regime's denigration of the Holocaust and state sponsorship of terrorism; The pall extends now to its own people as well. The onus is no longer on President Obama's detractors to justify the claim that America is abandoning its core values to accommodate Tehran, but on the Obama Administration to justify abandoning core American values of freedom and democracy to pursue a modus vivendi with a political system that has passed its shelf life.

The nuclear issue compounds this dilemma and reinforces the thesis that the time to act is upon us. To those who would argue that its adversaries should wait for the regime to collapse, they should

return to the observation raised in the original essay, well before the game changing elections of 2009: "*It is probably true to say that genuine elections, with all that entails (freedom of speech, the press, the judiciary) would lead to a removal of the present theocracy, but what chance are Iran's repressed democrats to have if the regime is emboldened by a nuclear umbrella that would make it even more impervious to moral suasion than it is now? Bestowing omnipotence on the regime will not be helping Iranians, any more than it will Iran's neighbors.*"

The curious state of American foreign policy does not mean, however, that it cannot be made to serve the greater good of securing the desired outcome of a non-nuclear Iran. In recognizing that American statecraft is no longer founded on valid assumptions and thus justifies a U-Turn, a Democratic administration can easily express both the will and sincerity of purpose that is the prerequisite of a successful demarche. By showing that President Obama is not bluffing, and has genuine reasons to feel that threatening Tehran is justifiable from every moral and strategic tenet that underpins American foreign policy, the Iranians will quickly ascertain that America "means business this time" and will back up words with deeds. As a Nobel Peace Prize winner, President Obama is the most qualified man to threaten war. Not since Nixon first visited Beijing has such an interesting opportunity to confound conventional wisdom and reach the desired outcome presented itself.

Conclusion

The underlying theme of a strategic analysis, if it has any merit whatsoever, should be able to withstand some new twists and tactical turns and still retain its fundamental value. Ideally, the shifts inherent in the passage of time will reinforce the original message.

In the year and a half since the writing of a strategy paper entitled "Taming the Paper Tiger of Tehran", it is fair to say that the original reading of the fundamental forces has been shown to be eerily correct in most every material respect. Thus, assuming there really is the will to implement the policy which has been advocated, there is nothing more to be said other than that the central recommendation (that "Iran's bluff should be called" through a discrete ultimatum) should be implemented in the very near future...before the political, military and economic leverage the West, the Sunni Arabs and even Israel all have with Iran is permanently lost.